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SUBJECT: COLOMBIA CONFLICT UPDATE FOR JULY-AUGUST, 2008

REF: QUITO 1059

Classified By: Political Counselor John Creamer
Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

1. (S) The success of operation "Jaque" on July 2 and the blows delivered to the FARC Secretariat over the past six months left the terrorist organization weakened and demoralized, resulting in record numbers of desertions. Still, the FARC continued to maintain between 8,000 and 12,000 fighters, including some 26 mobile columns; in addition, the group has thousands of militia members. As its military operations in rural areas fell due to Colombian military pressure, the FARC tried to increase its urban network by infiltrating universities and social movements. The Colombian military lost some momentum due to leadership changes and some units' involvement in serious human rights abuses. We have no evidence confirming reports that the FARC acquired man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS). The FARC maintained uneasy ties with the ELN and emerging criminal groups. End Summary

YEAR OF THE DEMOBS

2. (S) Demobilizations continued to climb in the third quarter of 2008, representing a nearly 15 percent increase over the same time frame in 2007. FARC desertions topped 2000 in this quarter and are on track to break last year's record. Nearly 40% of the FARC demobilizations in 2008 reportedly occurred as a result of Colombian military operations in Meta department. Desertions continued to rise among mid-level FARC combatants with 5 to 10 years of experience, yielding actionable intelligence to GOC forces. Demobilizations were highest among FARC units whose leaders had been killed or captured. The three main factors cited by demobilized FARC members were the desire for a life change, mistreatment by FARC superiors, and GOC military pressure.

COLMIL LOSING MOMENTUM?

3. (S) While terrorist desertions increased, the number of overall clashes and KIAs fell relative to the second quarter of 2008. Several factors appear to be behind the fall, including FARC leaders' orders to avoid combat to keep from losing more men and resources. The elite Carabineros police units also engaged in more manual eradication and fewer combat operations. The nationalization of the military's aviation fuel supply may also have led to fewer missions.

This loss of momentum is likely to carry into the fourth quarter, especially given leadership changes within the Colombian Army, revelations of serious human rights abuses committed by some units, and the traditional end of year holiday lull. Still, the Army continued to destroy major caches of FARC weapons and supplies, cripple the FARC's communications networks, and reduce the group's financial resources.

HVT'S GO TO GROUND

14. (S) Although the third quarter started with Operation "Jaque" on July 2, which netted FARC commanders Gerardo Aguilar Ramirez (alias Cesar) and Alexander Farfan Suarez (alias Gafas), there were only modest high value target (HVT) successes later in the quarter. After "Jaque," the FARC Secretariat reportedly issued orders to stop using signal communications, opting instead for hand-delivery of encrypted messages. This significantly reduced the number of actionable SIGINT hits. There were unconfirmed reports that Monojoy may have relocated to Huila Department, and that Alfonso Cano may have moved into more difficult terrain in Tolima department. The following is a list of mid-level HVTs netted by the COLMIL this quarter:

- Jesus Agudelo Rodriguez (alias El Paisa), was killed on September 22, 2008 in a Colombian Air Force strike on the border of Antioquia and Choco departments. The military also seized a memory stick in this operation with information on thousands of alleged FARC members. The stick also revealed that several hundred FARC had been executed for trying to escape. El Paisa was responsible for some 500 murders and 400 kidnappings, including the 2003 murders of former Antioquia government Guillermo Gaviria Correa, former minister Gilberto Echeverry and seven soldiers held hostage by the group.

- Miller Sanchez Useche (alias Gabino) was killed on August 24 in combat in Arauca, near the Venezuelan border. Gabino was reportedly the head of a FARC mobile column responsible for the security of German Suarez Briceno (alias Grannobles), the brother of FARC Secretariat member and Eastern Bloc Commander Mono Jojoy. Grannobles was wanted in the United States for the 1999 kidnapping and murder of Amcits Larry Gay Laheenae, Terence Freitas, and Ingrid Inawatuk.

- Jose Felipe Rizo (alias Jurga Jurga), commander of the FARC's 10th Front, was killed on July 29th in an air attack, along with 20 other rebels. Jurga Jurga was also a close associate of Mono Jojoy and his brother Grannobles.

- Gener Garcia Molina (alias John 40), the leader of the FARC's 43rd Front, was believed to be injured after an air-raid in Guaviare on September 3, 2008. The raid also resulted in the death of 9 other FARC members, the capture of two others, and the seizure of USD one million in cash as well as a large cache of weapons and supplies.

THE FARC ADAPTS, AGAIN

15. (C) Despite the FARC's losses during this quarter, local analysts noted that the group has a history of adapting to survive. In addition to relying more on snipers and land mines in rural areas, the FARC also stepped up efforts to infiltrate universities to gain new recruits and resources. Pro-Uribe Senator Gina Parody presented video footage and other evidence of the FARC's efforts to recruit university students; police have arrested 67 students suspected of FARC ties so far in 2008. GOC officials also alleged that the FARC exploited existing social movements to incite violence and instability. President Uribe claimed the FARC instigated the sugar cane cutters (corteros) strike in mid-September and also infiltrated indigenous protests in Cauca. Most analysts attribute this shift to the FARC's new leader Alfonso Cano, who has a more political bent.

URBAN, ASYMMETRICAL ATTACKS

¶16. (S) Colombian officials accused the FARC of carrying out several deadly bombings in Cali, Bogota and in Antioquia department. They speculated that the attacks were designed to show the group's continued resilience after a string of high profile, tactical GOC victories. The FARC set off a car bomb near the Palace of Justice in Cali on August 31, killing four civilians and injuring 26. Police believe that the FARC also detonated a bomb in Ituango, Antioquia on August 14, killing seven civilians and wounding more than 50 others. GOC officials blamed several smaller bombings in Bogota during this quarter on FARC extortion attempts. The FARC has not claimed responsibility for any of these acts, but issued a communique on August 21 stressing that it remained "strong" despite recent GOC successes.

MANPADS: A POTENTIAL GAME CHANGER

¶17. (S) Security analysts agree that the FARC's acquisition of man-portable air-defense systems ("MANPADS") would represent a game changer, robbing the Colombian military of its crucial air mobility. Embassy Ecuador recently reported (see reftel) that President Correa authorized the deployment of MANPADS to the Colombia-Ecuador border, but sensitive sources report that the Ecuadorian military had not yet done so due to fears that the weapons could end up in FARC hands. On August 4, 2008, the FARC destroyed a Colombian helicopter, killing a colonel and two other officials in Melgar, Tolima. However, the investigation concluded that helicopter was blown up by a command-detonated explosive device and not a MANPAD. We have no evidence confirming reports that the FARC has acquired MANPADS.

FARC, ELN, BACRIM - AN UNEASY RELATIONSHIP

¶18. (S) The ELN was estimated to have approximately 2,000 men organized in 6 fronts, down from more than 4,500 in the year ¶2000. The number of clashes between the ELN and the Colombian military has fallen sharply since 2000, with only 80 encounters reported to date in 2008. The ELN was reportedly regrouping into smaller, more dispersed fronts, avoiding combat and instead stepping up its use of land mines. The ELN, FARC and new criminal groups jockeyed for control of territory and lucrative drug trafficking routes. Some FARC fronts cooperated with criminal groups headed by Daniel Rendon (alias Don Mario) in northwest Colombia and Pedro Guerro (alias Cuchillo) in Colombia's eastern lowlands. Cuchillo also reportedly moved to fill the void left by the decimation of the FARC's 16th Front in Vichada. Still, in other areas, the groups were in open conflict, as evidenced by reported fierce clashes between the FARC and the ELN in Narino department.
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